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ABSTRACT

This bulletin brings together the concepts of parent networking and the Internet. The document highlights key free or low cost features of the Internet which have proven to be useful tools in linking together networks of parents. It addresses the following six questions: (1) What if I don't have a computer? (2) How can I get Web access? (3) How do I get a free e-mail address? (4) How can I learn to surf? (5) What are search engines all about? and (6) How can I use the Internet to support parent leadership activities? A beginner's guide to Web resources for parents of young children with disabilities is also included. (SG)

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Building Networks of Leaders through the Internet

by Glenn Gabbard

NECTAS Early Childhood Bulletin
Summer 2001

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NECTAS

EARLY CHILDHOOD BULLETIN

News by and for Parents and Parent Members of State Interagency Coordinating Councils

Prepared by the Federation for Children with Special Needs
Parent Component Staff of NECTAS

Summer 2001

Building Networks of Leaders through the Internet

by Glenn Gabbard
NECTAS at the Federation for Children with Special Needs, Boston, Massachusetts

In many ways, the Internet continues to influence the way we think and act. Even if we don't have a computer, terms like "dot.com", "logging on" , and "web page" are part of what we see and hear on a daily basis. It's plain that the Internet has revolutionized the way people can communicate with each other and create connections around issues of common interest.

Creating and building strong networks of support is a key element of parent leadership. Well before the inception of the computer, parents relied on information networks to gather resources related to their family's and children's needs. Numbered among the parents who are key players in any community change efforts are many experts who have truly mastered the art of networking.

The purpose of this bulletin is to bring together these two concepts: parent networking and the Internet. In it, we hope to outline some of the key features of the Internet, which have proven powerful in linking together new or already existing networks of parents. As the Internet has developed and become more popular, the range of features that are available at little or no cost to the user has become quite rich--and often intimidating.

Indeed, at a recent meeting of major "thinkers" about the internet and its future, a number of experts in developing the potential of the Internet expressed their disappointment that it has become, in many ways, as difficult and thorny as it is useful. One of the problems is that there is so much information available that it has become very difficult to know how reliable the information is. For example, there is enormous concern about how reliable the kinds of medical information are on some sites. Another huge issue is the effect that the Internet may have on individuals' ability to maintain their personal privacy. As more and more information is recorded electronically through on-line purchasing and web surfing, it becomes possible to know more and more about the private lives of those same people.

This bulletin is not intended to be an endorsement of any particular product or service on the Internet. Instead, it is intended to highlight key free or low cost features which have proven useful in connecting communities of leaders engaged in a common cause for change. Clearly, this is a list that's already incomplete, given the vast number of resources available on the web. Think of it as a beginning of an ongoing conversation about tools that can be used skillfully to support the work in which parents are engaged.

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What If I Don't Have a Computer?

Gaining access to a computer is getting easier and easier.

- **Go to the Public Library.**
  Public libraries offer free access to computers for extended web searching. Individuals can also check their email messages. If you haven't had much practice using a computer or navigating the web, think about the library as a good training ground. Usually, you can reserve time for practicing and exploring and get help from the library staff at the same time.

- **Access Computer Recycling Sites.**
  As the cost of computers continues to decrease, the availability of donated computers of a reasonably high quality continues to increase. Of course, there's more competition among various non-profit agencies and groups for these computers, so persistence and patience is important.

Individual parents may be able to affiliate themselves with a local non-profit agency such as a parent training information center or a local advocacy group to qualify for some of these donated units. There are many sites, however, that will consider requests from individuals.

One of the best resources for searching for learning how to begin your search for recycled computers is the Nonprofit Recycling & Reuse Network . The network is made up of a computer recyclers across the country. There is a useful database that can locate possible sites within your own community where recycled computers are available free or at low cost. Check out this excellent website at : *www.recycles.org/list*

Because of its unique focus, check out the National Cristina Foundation (NCF). NCF provides computer technology and solutions to give people with disabilities, students at risk and economically disadvantaged persons the opportunity, through training, to lead more independent and productive lives. Many non-profit organizations serving people with disabilities and their families have been able to access computers from the Cristina Foundation: *www.cristina.org*

How Can I Get Free Web Access?

Many internet users have been quite happy using the web through dial-up access. Services such as those listed below offer you access to the Internet without a fee. In order to access these sites, users will need to have a telephone jack, a modem, and a reasonably powerful computer.

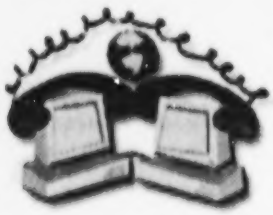
- **Juno** (*www.juno.com*)
- **NetZero** (*www.netzero.com*)
- **BlueLight** (*www.bluelight.com*)
- **DotNow** (*www.dotnow.com*)

In exchange for this free service, these companies post advertising on their sites and ask for participation in polls about the users' interest and hobbies. Users can't always expect immediate high-speed access, but typically these services provide ready access to the Internet without too many problems.

An often-overlooked free avenue to the Internet is the local public library. Typically, most libraries across the country have at least one computer that community members may use to sign on. Users often are asked to sign up in advance to reserve their on-line time; usually time limits of 30 to 60 minutes exist depending on the library and the time of day.

How Do I Get a Free Email Address?

Getting a free e-mail address is incredibly easy on the web these days. In order to get an account, most sites will ask for some general information about you and your interests. Usually, this takes only a few minutes. Users can choose whether or not they would like to receive information about these topics via email in the future. Free email accounts are available through a website, though some also offer special software which users install on their computers. Many parents who use the Internet very infrequently will get a free email account for a specific leadership activity. For example, some ICC subcommittees ask their members to get free email accounts so that they can distribute minutes easily and get feedback about specific policy issues. Other parents who travel across large distances use these free email addresses to separate out their parent leadership work from their work at home or on the job.



Some of the more popular free web-based e-mail sites are:

- **Hotmail** (*www.hotmail.com*)
- **Yahoo** (*www.yahoo.com*)
- **Juno** (*www.juno.com*)

A reasonably good site for selecting a free e-mail address may be found at: *www.1-free-email-addresses-hotmail.com*

Also, *www.thatweb.com* allows users to check any e-mail account from anywhere. This site might be useful for parents who already have an e-mail account but do not know how to access it from another location.

How Can I Learn to Surf?

- The best way to learn about the web is to explore it with an experienced friend, family member, or colleague. (Consider asking a computer-savvy elementary or middle school student!) Public libraries will also offer training on a regular basis.

- Consider using public library books or videos on the subject. There are many basic books and audio visual materials that will help you get started. Again, ask your librarian or local bookstore for these resources.

- Use the web to find websites, newsletters, and other special help to introduce you to the web. A good list to begin with is located at:

  http://netforbeginners.about.com/internet/net-forbeginners/

What Are Search Engines All About?

- So much information is available on the web these days and the information changes very quickly. The challenge can often be finding information that is useful, accurate, and timely. A good search engine can help you to locate the information that you need.

- Search engines are on special web sites that search the Internet for specified keywords and return a list of the documents where the keywords were found.

- Some of the more popular search engines are:

  - **Lycos** (*www.lycos.com*)
  - **Google** (*www.google.com*)
  - **Yahoo** (*www.yahoo.com*)
  - **HotBot** (*www.hotbot.com*)

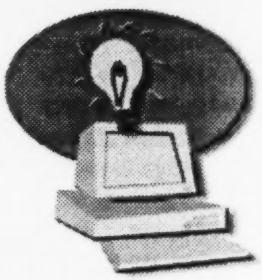
- Some people use a "meta" search engine to look for information using many different websites at the same time. Check out:

  - **Metacrawler** (*www.metacrawler.com*)
  - **DogPile** (*www.dogpile.com*)

- For a good list of search engines as well as an explanation of how they work, go to Walt's "Navigating the Net Forum" at: *www.walthowe.com/navnet/faq/search.html*

Finding reliable information on the web is a challenging task. Fortunately, there are a number of web portals, which provide easier access to selected information that may be a bit more reliable and focused on a user's needs. Rather than starting a search using a search engine like Yahoo or HotBot, some users start their search at sites like Looksmart (*www.looksmart.com*) or About.Com (*www.about.com*). These portals open access to selected sites, which are reviewed periodically by individuals to assure that they are generally functional and helpful. About.Com offers human "guides" who collect and monitor information on many differing topics.

How Can I Use the Internet to Support Parent Leadership Activities?



Parent groups of many sizes use free websites, which create private "intranets." These sites are open to anyone who may want to create a group that is interested in a particular topic. Users can take advantage of free mailing lists (or "listservs"), chats, and shared files, including databases and other kinds of documents. Using the listserv feature, group members can send messages to their own selected group of recipients. In addition, these sites provide a number of features including group polling, calendars, and discussion forums on particular topics.

The most popular of these groups are:

- **YahooGroups** (*www.yahoogroups.com*)
- **CommunityZero** (*www.communityzero.com*)
- **Intranets.Com** (*www.intranets.com*)

Usually, one or two individual needs to get the group started and do the ongoing "housekeeping" for the group. This usually doesn't require more than an hour or so per week or less. It's also possible to set up a group for a very short period of focused time to complete a project. For example, one IFSP team created a short-term e-mail group which they used to monitor the development of a service plan for a child. Each member of the team was able to send their thoughts about how the plan was going and suggest possible changes. All of these comments were integrated into a draft IFSP, which the group discussed at an in-person team meeting.

Some examples:

- The Parent Leadership Project in Massachusetts links many of the families served by the state early intervention system so that they can receive regular updates about the system. Participants can also share files and participate in real-time chats about particular topics or immediate interest.

- A recent group of parents who completed the New York State Early Intervention Partners in Policymaking Training set up an intranet site so they could continue to share ideas and support. It's also possible to post a calendar of events, photos, and other information that groups may need in order to organize future events, advocate for change, or just have fun!

- The International 2001 Parent to Parent Conference has set up a group that informs interested individuals about this important meeting and allows parents to meet each other on-line. Check out the site at: *www.parenttoparent.org/2002.htm*

- An interesting approach to mobilizing public awareness may be found at www.actionize.com. Actionize.com provides users with free web sites and web-based petitions for a variety of social causes.

Other Innovative Possibilities

With cell phones, fax machines, and e-mail, the challenge to many has become not when to communicate but HOW to communicate. Many web resources make it much easier to make a phone call or send a fax, often for free or at a very low cost. One enterprising family resource specialist uses a free FAX service to distribute materials to a network of parents across the large state in which they all live. In this way, parents in local communities were able to read materials immediately that weren't easily sent via e-mail.

A good list of many of these fax and telephone resources are located at:

http://freebies.about.com/shopping/freebies/cs/faxphone/

Web Resources for Parents of Young Children with Disabilities: A Beginner's Guide

Listing all of the web sites that meet the needs of parents of young children with disabilities is a near impossible task. This list should therefore be considered a basic introduction to some key sites which may be useful to parents new to the internet or as part of an orientation for new parent ICC members.

- The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities. NICHCY is the national information and referral center that provides information on disabilities and disability-related issues for families, educators, and other professionals. www.nichcy.org

- The Family Village Project has a very parent-friendly website that provides lots of information and resources about specific disabilities and opportunities to be in touch with others with similar issues. www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index.htmlx

- Our-Kids is one of the more popular sites on the Internet for parents and caregivers of children with disabilities. More than 700 individuals participate in this listserv. Formed in 1993, the primary mission of the Our-Kids Listserv, according to the homepage, "is to provide information and support for Our-Kids." www.our-kids.org

- Family Voices is a national grassroots organization directed by parents of children/adults with special health care needs. The national Family Voices office can provide you with the name of the Family Voices coordinator in your state. www.familyvoices.org

- The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System (NECTAS) is a federally-funded project that provides information about (1) best practices in early childhood services for young children with disabilities, (2) national early childhood policies, and (3) early childhood research. www.nectas.unc.edu

- The Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Projects (the Alliance), focuses on providing technical assistance for establishing, developing, and coordinating parent training and information projects under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. www.taalliance.org

- The National Interagency Coordinating Council Parent Leadership Support Project is designed to help parent leaders serving on their state ICCs throughout the country. These parents play an important role in developing policies and designing programs for children with disabilities and their families. www.iccparent.org

If you are interested in joining an ongoing listserv, designed to facilitate communication among parent leaders serving on federal, state, and local interagency coordinating councils (ICCs), then join the

"NECTAS-ICC-P" Listserv

To subscribe to the list, send email to: barndt@fcsn.org. *Join the list and share your own favorite web-based resources and ideas!*

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